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# Coronet Warning Ignored In 2001

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PLANT CITY - Two years ago, federal officials sent a letter to state environmental regulators, warning of potential health risks posed by a phosphate processor.

The company's name was a familiar one to the state agency: Coronet Industries.

Yet the state Department of Environmental Protection never shared the letter with residents. Nor was it forwarded to state or local health departments.

It took public outcry and a federally mandated public health assessment before state or county health officials became aware of the information sent by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. A state Health Department scientist found the letter while looking into reports of cancer rates among people who live near Coronet.

"The first time the EPA study came to my attention was when I reviewed [DEP] files," said Shaun Crawford, a scientist at the state Department of Health.

Mike Gonsalves, who oversees the Department of Environmental Protection's solid waste division, said the regulatory agency received a "courtesy copy" of the letter in June 2001 but was not required to pass that information on or act on it. He wouldn't elaborate on why the letter wasn't shared with residents or health departments.

Health officials are trying to determine whether pollution from the animal feed supplement manufacturer is to blame for health problems reported by residents in two communities near Coronet. The nine- to 12-month study will examine cancer rates in the area and causes.

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Arsenic, lead, cadmium, chromium, gross alpha radiation and fluoride were among the potentially harmful substances found in levels exceeding state and federal guidelines on Coronet property. The plant also discharges tons of dust and other airborne pollutants each year.

On Friday, county Environmental Protection Commission Executive Director Richard Garrity sent a letter asking Sheriff Cal Henderson and State Attorney Mark Ober to investigate claims by former Coronet employees that they were ordered to dump toxic waste and deceive government regulators. Spokeswomen for Henderson and Ober said they either hadn't received the letter or hadn't had time to act.

Garrity attached a copy of a Tampa Tribune article published Friday that included interviews with three former Coronet employees, who said they were told to break environmental laws. He also asked Henderson and Ober to review a broadcast from Wednesday on WFLA, News Channel 8, on the subject.

### A History Of Violations

Coronet has a long history of environmental violations.

The letter from the EPA was sent after a congressionally mandated study showed Coronet was among four facilities in an eight-state region that had greater potential than most industrial facilities to affect public health.

"There are two ways we will get involved in a public health assessment," said Beth Copeland of the state Health Department. "One way is if environmental regulatory agencies ask us to be involved. The other way is when we are requested by the public."

Copeland and Crawford are conducting a public health assessment to determine whether cancer-causing substances on Coronet's property or the plant's air emissions are affecting people's health.

They also are looking at other possible sources of pollution, including eight old landfills in the area, including one on property once owned by Coronet that's slated for development. Rezoning that would clear the way for construction of 2,600 homes at the Lakeside Station development proposed at U.S. 92 and Park Road, north of Coronet. That development is on hold pending the outcome of the health assessment.

The health assessment, commissioned by the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, was generated by public concern, Copeland said. The study will include taking samples from private wells in the area, to see whether pollution has contaminated water supplies.

State health officials wouldn't comment on whether regulatory agencies should have notified them, but they indicated limited testing of areas around Coronet has not allowed them to accurately evaluate the scope of the community's health concerns.

The letter was forwarded from the EPA's office in Atlanta to Florida Department of Environmental Protection officials in Tallahassee in June 2001. It was received nine days later in the Tampa office.

Crawford would not have reviewed the files and discovered the letter if residents in neighborhoods near Coronet Industries had not requested help from federal health officials.

Coronet also knew about the study, EPA officials said.

County Environmental Protection Commission officials said they were not notified of the study until last week - after The Tampa Tribune asked questions of DEP officials.

"I never received it or heard anything about it until this week," said Sam Elrabi, an engineer who oversees the county agency's water management division. "It is always a concern to hear things like that. I had no knowledge."

State and county environmental officials on Monday vowed to work more closely together in the future.

Reporter Deborah Alberto can be reached at (813) 754-3765.

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